

House Bill 162

(H) Federal Relations, Energy, and Telecommunications

Testimony of Lesa Evers  
Economic Development Specialist in the  
Governor's Office of Economic Development

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

For the record, my name is Lesa Evers.

As an Economic Development Specialist in the Governor's Office of Economic Development, I work in collaboration with our tribal nations to increase economic development opportunities on our Montana reservations. Economic growth in Indian Country is a top priority for our state as the economy in Indian Country is one of the most challenging tasks we face.

On behalf of Governor Schweitzer and the Governor's Office of Economic Development, I ask for your support and passage of House Bill 162.

One way we see economic growth in Indian Country being successful is in the energy field. In the case of two reservations, the Crow and Northern Cheyenne, the major opportunity is in coal development and value-adding to that coal. Those two reservations are designated as part of the Designated Coal Impact Area.

The Coal Board grants are available to assist those local and tribal governments within this Designated Coal Impact Area who suffer the impacts as well as the benefits of coal development in their respective city, county or reservation. As we

all know, when development occurs in any major form, there can be significant impact to local infrastructure.

Currently, tribal governments have access to the coal board monies. However, the grants that are allocated to tribes are limited to 7% of the total grants. In contrast, the other eligible local governments have no restriction or limitation. Under this scenario, if the state's major coal development occurs within tribal areas (a real possibility), the ability of the state to properly assist with supportive infrastructure to help its citizens is greatly impaired by the current statutory limitation.

When and if such development occurs, increasing access for our tribal nations to the appropriate level of needed coal board funds (as is currently applicable to our local government entities) would assist them in their efforts, at a minimum, to keep their roads safe, bridges solid and water clean and healthy for all.

On behalf of Governor Schweitzer and the Governor's Office of Economic Development, I urge a "do pass" of House Bill 162.

Thank you.